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ABSTRACT

In this paper the work of democratic theorists is applied to an analysis of democratic decision-making in a public high school. The article opens with a brief description of democratic decision-making as a school-reform strategy. The data for the study were collected in 1998 and 1999 and were based on 52 interviews with teachers, administrators, students, and parents, and 45 observations of decision makers' meetings. The research focused on decision making as an end in itself, rather than as a means to a desired educational outcome, and centered on three questions: What is the appeal of democratic decision-making processes? What sorts of tensions arise from the processes -- what is difficult about democratic decision making? and How are the tensions attended to and/or resolved, if at all? The findings show that democratic theory is useful in explaining the issues that teachers, students, parents, and administrators articulate and reflect the concerns expressed by democratic theorists. The paper highlights the ways in which democratic theory may offer answers that schools involved in democratic decision-making may find useful. It concludes by suggesting that there is a need for researchers to develop an assessment tool that can be used to evaluate democratic decision-making processes. (Contains 44 references.) (RJM)

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ED 432 807

Democratic Decision Making Theory and Practice in a Public High School: A Call for a Better Understanding

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Paper abstract

In this paper I apply the work of democratic theorists to an analysis of democratic decision making (also known as shared decision making, and site and/or school based decision making) in a public high school. I begin with a brief description of democratic decision making as a school reform and a synopsis of my data collection and analysis to date. I then argue that, in order to understand democratic decision making as a reform it is necessary to study it as an end in itself, not as a means to a desired educational outcome. In order to study the decision making itself, I suggest researchers ask three questions: (1) What is the appeal of democratic decision making processes -- why adopt or maintain them? (2) What sorts of tensions arise from the processes -- what is difficult about democratic decision making? (3) How are the tensions attended to and/or resolved, if at all? I then address the first two of these questions by relying on research I conducted this year at East High School.[1] My findings are preliminary as I have only begun to analyze the data, but it is clear that democratic theory is useful in explaining what I am seeing in practice. Teachers, students, parents and administrators articulate, grapple with, and reflect the very arguments and concerns expressed by democratic theorists. To address the third question I highlight ways in which democratic theory may offer answers --"solutions"-- that schools involved in democratic decision making may find useful. I conclude by suggesting that there is a need for researchers to develop an assessment tool that can be used to better evaluate democratic decision making processes.

Background of democratic decision making as a school reform

Democratic decision making in the public high schools is one of many current efforts at the national level to reform the public schools. Indeed, more than half of the public schools in the US include some form of shared or democratic decision making body, ranging from 22% of the schools in Nebraska to 86% of the schools in West Virginia (US Department of Education 1996). Put briefly, the intention of the reform is to share power (over curriculum, budget, school personnel, and other school matters) among stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and students in some cases.[2] Because the reform is interpreted differently by different schools, structures vary (i.e., who sits on the decision making body or bodies, for how long) and processes vary (i.e., how decisions get on the agenda, how meetings are run). While little is supported by policy makers in terms of the specifics of the reform, some of the biggest names in school reform and some of the largest state policy reforms endorse it. For example: Henry Levin's Accelerated Schools Project; Ted Sizer's

[1] All names of people and places involved with the school are pseudonyms.

[2] Of the schools with democratic decision making bodies, 95% included teachers, 79% included parents and, 28% included students on these bodies. Decision making on topics in 83% of the schools included curriculum and student discipline, 66% included school budget decisions and 33% included school personnel issues (US Department of Education 1996).

Coalition of Essential Schools; California's Senate Bill 1274 and the Kentucky Educational Reform Act, all call for some form of democratic decision making.

Looking across the various ways in which democratic decision making is implemented in schools it is apparent that they do not necessarily share a common core. It is therefore difficult to define the term in any broad sense. Therefore, I limit my definition to democratic decision making at East High School and define democratic decision making as the purposeful involvement of teachers, parents and/or students in decision making processes on significant issues and where the processes involve public deliberation of those issues. There is a growing body of literature specific to deliberative democracy (See Bohman and Rehg 1997 and Elster 1998) that contends that the process of deliberation seeks to produce reasoned agreement rather than simple aggregation (Johnson 1998, p.162). That is, rather than decide on an issue by simply taking a vote, participants deliberate and discuss their way to agreement on a decision. I pointedly include the deliberative aspect of the decision making process in my definition because it is a key element of decision making at East.

Research Synopsis

From January to June of 1998 I observed decision makers' meetings and interviewed teachers, parents, students and administrators at West and South high schools. The data from that research inform my work here, but for the purposes of this paper I rely exclusively on a preliminary analysis of data I collected between September 1998 and March 1999 at East High School,[1] including: 52 interviews with teachers, administrators,

[1] East High School has a population of over 1700 students and over 80 teachers. East is an old school in a middle class neighborhood. Of the students, 29% are in classes for English as a second language learners and over half of the students speak a language other than English at home. In terms of race, 31.6% of the students are Latino; 28.3% are White; 17.3% are Asian; 15.4% are Filipino; 5.1% are Black and 2.3% are Native American. The school's scores are the lowest in its district and many of the teachers speak sadly about the bad reputation that East has. Many worry that due to racism and classism upper and middle class parents refuse to send their children to East, making it even harder to compete with other district schools that largely serve higher SES students.

students and parents, and 45 observations of decision makers' meetings. The direct quotations used here are from 25 interviews with 22 different teachers whom I interviewed during the first semester of the school year, unless otherwise noted. The remaining interviews and observations inform my work, but presented too much data to synthesize and analyze by the deadline of this paper.

Democratic Decision Making -- How should we understand it?

I find two flaws in the research on democratic decision making. First, in recent research the question has been posed whether democratic decision making is simply a good public relations move (most parents like the idea of having a voice in the public schools) or if it is a reform that results in better student achievement, or higher teacher morale, or any sort of desired educational outcome. Research studies fail to show any clear correlations between democratic decision making and any of these educational outcomes (See Corbett 1996, Goldring, Ogawa and Conley 1998, Malen 1998, Malen and Ogawa 1990, Murphy and Beck 1995, Weiss and Cambone 1994, Wohlstetter et al. 1997, Wohlstetter and Odden 1992). Second, these studies rely heavily on organizational explanations of what constrains and enables the reform in its efforts to improve schools. While it is necessary to understand the organizational conditions (what about public schools organizationally and

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Five years ago East began to reform itself, modeling itself on the Coalition of Essential Schools principles and they have since been given much recognition and support for their work, including hundreds of thousands of dollars in Annenberg money. Much of their reform effort thus far has focused on the decision making processes. At this point there are eight formal decision making bodies at East: (1) five administrators whose responsibilities include hiring, firing and evaluating (largely under the principal's purview), discipline, scheduling of classes, general school environment; (2) steering committee -- three teachers with one period off each day and whose responsibilities include school reform/redesign efforts; (3) core team -- 15 teachers, one student and one administrator whose primary responsibility is to decide who and what the school will fund; (4) strand chairs -- three teachers with one period off each day to organize particular school redesign efforts (standards, literacy and assessment); (5) school site council -- five parents, five students and ten teachers and administrators who meet once a month and approve large budget items, gather information on school events and can initiate reform ideas; (6) department chairs who act as intermediaries between administration and departments; (7) departments -- groups of teachers who meet once a month on average and decide on curriculum and pedagogy issues; (8) whole staff -- every teacher, administrator, teacher's aid and school secretaries meet once every two weeks on average to decide on whole school change issues. The steering committee determines the agenda for these meetings. This is only a

institutionally makes change of this sort difficult and what enables change), such a framework limits the focus of the research to the context of the reform.

Context is important, but I argue it is not all there is to understanding school decision making reforms. While it is important to understand: who the participants are; the history of their relationships with each other and with the organization; how long each participant has been part of the organization and in what capacities; etcetera; this information does not help explain the nature of the reform itself. To understand democratic decision making, it may be helpful to understand theories of democratic practices. Thus I find two problems with the research done to date: the focus on outcomes and the focus on organizational context.

To get beyond the problems that riddle much of the research it is necessary to begin to better understand what democratic decision making is. This will require studying democratic decision making as an end in itself. By this I mean that we should evaluate democratic decision making reforms independent of the outcomes they produce. Researchers and policy analysts tend to evaluate the worthiness of any particular policy in terms of its outcomes. If the outcomes are good, then the policy is good, or successful. But governance structures are not the same as policies. They are forums for policy making and therefore they should not be evaluated solely by the outcomes of decisions made by the decision making body.

It is misleading to assess a decision making process solely by outcomes of the state or school. Consider an analogy between states and schools, for example: nobody would measure the worth of a country's decision making process by citing the country's gross national product (GNP). There is no necessary causal relation. The *way* decisions get made does not affect the GNP. The *decisions* can affect it, but not the decision making

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thumbnail sketch of the formal decision making bodies. Since the particular structures of the democratic decision making are not the focus of this paper I think it should suffice.

process.[3] America's form of governance is no better or worse *per se* when our GNP is especially high or low. Similarly, there is no reason to expect correlations between decision making structures in public schools and academic achievement of students. This is not to say that decision making bodies do not want the best outcomes for their states or for their schools. It is that decision making bodies are not the ones responsible for "production." Of course the decision makers can decide to pass certain policies that affect outcomes (tax cuts or going to block schedules in schools), but then it is those specific policies that should be evaluated, not the decision making processes. Bad or unfortunate outcomes under democratic governments do not necessarily impugn the government process itself.

In order to study the decision making process itself I suggest researchers begin asking different questions – questions that get at what it means to know a decision making model. These questions could be about how or what decisions are made. These would be questions that get at the specific structures of the particular school. The questions I focus on for this paper are more broad than that and offer another starting place for researchers. I ask: (1)What is the appeal of democratic decision making processes – why adopt or maintain them? (2) What sorts of tensions arise from the processes – what is difficult about democratic decision making? (3) How are the tensions attended to and/or resolved, if at all? Working from a preliminary analysis of some of the data I have collected at East and the reading I have done on democratic theory, I offer responses to the first two questions.

What is the appeal of democratic decision making?

James Madison quipped, "If men were angels we would need no government" (Madison 1961, p. 322). And indeed, since angels we are not, governments there are. States as well as organizations design decision and rule making bodies. But why design

[3] Of course the decision making process could possibly affect a country in terms of overall morale, but this is a long term effect and to begin to trace the effects of decision making styles, not decisions, on morale and

democratic ones?" At least five answers are supported by the theory and each is echoed by teachers, administrators, and students at East High School:

- Implementation of decisions is more likely.
- The more decision makers, the better the chance that good decisions will be made.
- With multiple decision makers the school will not dramatically change course with each new leader.
- Practice of democratic virtues and skills is necessary to a democratic state.
- Democratic decision making is the most just form of decision making.

Implementation of decisions is more likely

Theorists and practitioners alike contend that by giving people a voice in the decisions that affect their lives, the decisions are thereby more likely to be acted on than if someone else made the very same decision for them but gave them no role in the decision making. Whether it is a fact of human nature or simply a myth, democratic decision making seems to: ensure more interest in and care for the state (or school, as the case may be); and to increase individuals' willingness to go along with whatever decisions are the final ones.

Theorists suggest that under democratic decision making structures, as opposed to more hierarchical or dictatorial ones, implementation is facilitated by inspiring interest. John Stuart Mill declares, "Let a person have nothing to do for his country and he will not care for it" (Mill 1991, p.55). And Euripides asserted centuries earlier that while the people will follow the king's lead, if the king involves them he thereby increases their loyalty to the cause (Farrar 1992, p.25). Teachers and administrators at East concur with the venerable Mill and Euripides. "A wonderful thing happens when you empower

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subsequently on GNP, seems quite an unwieldy, and perhaps unnecessary task. That is, there are better ways of evaluating decision making processes.

teachers. They are interested! It's human nature," exclaimed Louie, one of the assistant principals (Louie 9/30/98, p.9). Another assistant principal (AP), Burt, discussed students' roles in decision making at East, "I think kids who are doubters and hesitant, once given the opportunity to be involved, will understand more clearly and become participators" (Burt 12/9/98, p. 5).

James Fearon suggests that not only will individual interest grow, but so too will willingness. He writes,

> Another potential rationale for having a discussion rather than merely proposing and voting on bills would be to make sure that everyone has a chance to have their say and thus be more willing to abide by or support the result (Fearon 1998, p.57).

(See also Mill 1991, p.282; and Skinner 1992 p.62).

At East teachers express comparable rationales. "The advantage is if everyone owns a little piece of the problem and the solution, it is more likely to be followed through" (Elsa 12/2/98, p.4). "People need to talk about it and then come to that internal decision. If they don't go through that internal decision making process, they are not going to engage in the difficult work" (Donald 12/4/98, p. 9). "It's similar to stock options. When you have a vested interest in what is going on you usually work a little harder to do your best. I am working a little harder now to make the schedule work" (Emily 12/16/98, p.4).

The more decision makers, the better the chance that good decisions will be made

This argument is simple, perhaps even cliched, but it is a justification found both in the theory and practice: with more people at the decision making table it is more likely that more ideas and better ideas will arise.[6] The greater the diversity and the more represented the entire state (or school) is the better. Iris Marion Young explains,

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[5] I use the word practitioner somewhat unusually here. I wish to convey the idea of teachers, administrators, parents and students, anyone who is active in the democratic decision making process.

[6] Many theorists also suggest that with more voices at the decision making table there is a greater chance of disagreement, creating an inefficient process and possibly resulting in divisiveness among individuals or groups. I explore each of these ideas in more depth in the following section on the tensions inherent to democratic decision making.

> If citizens participate in public discussion that includes all social perspectives in their partiality and gives them a hearing, they are most likely to arrive at just and wise solutions to their collective problems (Young 1997, p. 402).

Young emphasizes the need for marginalized voices to be part of the public discussion, but argues that it is not only for the sake of justice that decision making be inclusive. She suggests that the decisions will be *wiser* for having the input of all possible perspectives. (See also Mill 1991). Her sentiment is echoed by an AP who implies that children's parents are often marginalized in school decision making processes.

> There are 1700 children here and they and their families have ideas. Some are probably solid ideas we never would have thought of. With more fuel in the fire we just might create a better educational system for the kids, and that's what it's all about" (Burt 12/9/98, p.5).

Fearon argues that, marginalization issues aside, "Individuals pool their limited capabilities through discussion and so increase the odds of making a good choice" (Fearon 1998, p.49). (See also Mill 1991, p.55). Likewise, a teacher at East states, "The more minds the better when it comes to discussing ideas" (Gwen 12/16/98, p.3). "Two heads are better than one and here, it's 100 heads are better than five" (Burt referring to the 100 staff members and five administrators, 12/9/98, p.5).

With multiple decision makers the school/state will not dramatically change course with each new leader

A third justification of democratic decision making is that institutional norms will arise that diminish reliance on individual leaders. The hope is that if power rests with the whole school, and if the goals and vision have been developed on a consensus basis, then the efforts to move in certain directions can continue even when key leaders move on. In a dictatorship or a strictly top-down organization, only one individual or a handful of people have the responsibility for determining the direction the organization will take. This of course can facilitate arriving at a decision about which direction to go but if one of the key

[1] Whether or not it is a good idea to marginalize parents' voices is not relevant here. I only mean to express what Burt implies in his quote.

leaders or *the* leader leaves then the organization may stumble along without direction for a period of time. In a more democratic decision making model, the direction would be determined by all participants and thus run little to no risk if some of the participants left. It would not be dependent on the charisma of a particular leader, the wisdom of any one individual or the beneficence of a beloved despot.

Jean Hampton contends that American democracy was founded on the idea of a government that "could be changed quickly with minimal cost and disruption to the people...[This] would increase the people's control over the shape of the political game and thus allow them to better supervise their leaders" (Hampton 1994, p.32). Hampton and the teachers at East agree on decision making structures that do not rely on a single person, noting the beauty of a system able to withstand constant "revolution." Public schools, especially ones in poor neighborhoods, are particularly vulnerable to high principal turnover. A teacher who has been at East throughout his career explains, "We have had over six different principals in 29 years, each with a different management style" (Fred 12/2/98, p.1). Another teacher complains that "Every time a principal leaves we have to start over again" (Betty 3/3/99, p.9). With democratic decision making processes the school is able to be more resilient -- able to continue working in the direction it mapped out for itself.

Practice of democratic virtues and skills is necessary to a democratic state

Over the course of American history, politicians, philosophers, and educators have argued that the "future of democracy depends on the existence of local social spaces in which human actors can learn and exercise the skills of dialogue and debate necessary for the development of a democratic citizenry" (Anderson 1998, p. 575). At various times calls went out for workplace democracy -- organizing factories and businesses in more "democratic" ways (Campbell et al. 1987). Public schools especially were, and still are, perceived as appropriate and crucial training grounds for future democratic citizens. "A

democratic society is responsible for educating not just some but all children for citizenship" (Gutmann 1987, p.13. See also Barber 1993; Barber 1992; Bowles and Gintis 1993; Cohen 1996; Dewey 1916; Gamson and Levin 1984; Levin 1990; Mansbridge 1980; Mill 1991; Power 1989; Putnam 1996; Putnam 1995; Walzer 1980).

Given the abundance of attention this argument garners by past and present theorists, it is striking how few practitioners rely on it as a justification for designing and working with democratic decision making processes in the public high schools. This far in my data analysis I find only one reference and it is not related directly to the decision making model, "For democracy to be furthered or maintained in the United States we need to develop critical thinking" (Debora 1/15/99, p. 9). It is understandable given that (1) schools have always had a dual purpose: to produce citizens and to produce workers and (2) since *A Nation at Risk* called on Americans to arm their students with more globally competitive skills, the focus has been on producing future workers. It is ironic however that a school that moves to more democratic decision making processes does not see a relationship between its decision making processes and what was one of the central reasons public schools were developed in the first place. I will look further into this issue over the next three months of my research.

Democratic decision making is the most just form of decision making

Democratic decision making is good in itself, independent of any anticipated consequences. It is the morally right thing to do (Fearon 1998, p. 60). The process of democratic decision making is morally superior to other decision making processes since equality and fairness demand that all those affected by a decision have a seat on the decision making body or are able to elect a representative to that body. The decisions, or outcomes, will not necessarily be more just or more wise just because everyone had a voice in the decision making, but the decision making process itself will be more just than a decision making process that did not include all those affected by the decision.

When theorists and practitioners contend that it is the most just form of decision making, by "just" they imply two things. First, the decision is more legitimate since it is a decision everyone helped make. "Legitimate authority requires the consent of the governed, subject to periodic review" (Kymlicka 1996, p.168). (See also Estlund 1997, Mansbridge 1980, and Walzer 1980). Teachers echo the theorists clearly. "If it's dictatorial, people get unhappy or feel left out or invalidated. People are far happier to live with something that is not their first preference if they feel they have had a fair voice in that process" (Henry 12/9/98, p.4). "I just believe in a true democratic kind of situation... I don't mind fighting a battle and losing, but it really bothers me when I don't get the opportunity to fight the battle" (Burt 12/9, p.5). "As long as I have a say, you have listened to me and then the greater body decides that we need to go in a different direction, then it's fine, as long as I've been heard" (Emily 12/16/98, p. 9). The democratic process ensures (or at least is perceived as ensuring) that nobody is overlooked. Therein lies its legitimacy.

Second, the process emphasizes the equality of all involved, thereby supporting the dignity and self respect of all participants. Bowles and Gintis explain,

> Democratic accountability of the state is essential to assuring the equal dignity of citizens. This argument holds that unaccountable relationships of power establish master-servant relationships inimical to self respect and mutual recognition among citizens (Bowles and Gintis 1993, p. 89).

Similarly a teacher argues that under the democratic decision making model, "This is the best I've ever had it. People have the opportunity for great input and there is none of this traditional, top-down, 'I have to have my foot on your head to stand on you to get a little higher myself'" (Louisa 9/25/98, p. 11). Theorists and practitioners see justice in the horizontal versus vertical nature of the decision making process.

[1] Interestingly "the governed" would obviously include students and while teachers clearly feel strongly that they should have a voice in decision making, there is far less certainty over whether students should have a voice in decision making. I return to this topic in the following section on tensions in democratic decision making.

What sorts of tensions arise from the democratic decision making process in a public school?

Researchers have ignored the inherent appeal of democratic decision making and instead have focused on outcomes that are not logically related to the decision making processes. In order to begin to accurately assess decision making reforms, researchers should first consider why schools adopt or maintain democratic decision making structures. In the case of East, the reasons teachers support democratic decision making should be clear now. The next question I suggest researchers should ask is, once the democratic decision making structures are in place, what sorts of tensions arise? I find at East, not surprisingly perhaps, that they are tensions inherent to democratic forms of decision making. I focus on five tensions here, though there are likely to be more:

- Inefficiency of democratic decision making vs. the efficiency of hierarchical decision making
- Self interest vs. the common good
- Experts as decision makers vs. an inclusive decision making process
- Minority rights vs. majority rights
- Process vs. outcome

Inefficiency of democratic decision making vs. the efficiency of hierarchical decision making

There is almost no debate over whether democratic decision making is inefficient.[3] It is. The debate is over whether it is valuable despite its inefficient nature. Demands on time increase in at least three ways: more time is necessary for decision making meetings when there are multiple decision makers; it takes time to communicate progress on

[3] Bowles and Gintis (1993) do argue that in fact the democratic firm will be more efficient than the capitalist firm for three reasons: participants will work harder due to the motivational effect of being a

decisions and agendas for future meetings; it takes time to build the trust, respect and technical skills necessary to democratic decision making (speaking openly in front of and perhaps debating with others in public meetings, following procedural rules, etcetera). May, an A.P. at East describes,

> The thing that makes our decision making process hard is time. It is a timely, thoughtful process -- it doesn't just happen. It evolves over years of trial and error and building trust and finding the systems that work... You have to establish the value of what we're doing -- the value of everybody's voice, that it's ok for people to disagree. And that if a decision doesn't go your way you have to be willing to accept that... It takes time and trust for this process to evolve (May 11/6/98, p. 9).

(See also Bowles and Gintis 1993; and Gamson and Levin 1984, on workplace democracy findings).

While every teacher I interviewed recognized the process as time- consuming, the number of teachers at East who said it was valuable nonetheless far exceeded the number who said it was not, though passions ran high on both sides. Those in favor of more efficiency in decision making declared, "We don't have time to ramble. Kids aren't being served now!" (Holly 1/28/99, p. 4). "The country would grind to a halt. This is slower than a snail's pace. You don't see this in corporate America. You wouldn't get all the workers together and discuss. What are the experts paid to know?" (Debora 1/15/99, p.3). And from the other side, "I don't buy it when teachers say 'My students are really suffering because I'm going to this meeting. People should be benefiting. Maybe they don't get their papers back the next day, but in the long run they should benefit because we are trying to make larger changes" (Karen 11/6/98, p. 5). "There's a lot of discussion, but that's why I like this school. I stay here because I want to be part of that" (Michael 10/30/98, p. 1).

Thucydides had a similar passion in his faith of democratic decision making. "[He] accepted the possibility of conflict, of disorder, of the triumph of desire over reason, in

decision maker; mutual monitoring, workers of other workers, will increase output; and there is a wage incentive. They are the only researchers, to my knowledge, who come to such a conclusion.

order to preserve the slender chance that a polis could realize its full potential to both express and transform the beliefs and capacities of its citizens" (Farrar 1992, p. 34). Thucydides advised, "Instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling block in the way of action, we think of it as an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all" (Thucydides in Elster, 1998, p. 1). The process is inefficient perhaps, but too valuable to take any other process.

Self interest vs. the common good

Two central tensions arise in democratic decision making around self interest and the common good. One is whether there is or can be a "common good" in any plurality and if not, what are the implications for democratic decision making? The other is whether those doing the decision making act in their own best interests or in the interests of everyone (or at least in the interests of the majority). If people perceive the decision makers as acting only out of self interest this is likely to result in a delegitimation of the decision making process altogether.

Is there such a thing as a common good? This is an old question and has been wrestled over by the likes of Isaiah Berlin and Jurgen Habermas, John Stuart Mill and Aristotle, Joseph Schumpeter and Jean Jacques Rousseau. On one side is Berlin, who contends that if we argue until the end of time we will find we have intransigent differences. Schumpeter concurs,

> There is no such thing as a uniquely determined common good that all people could agree on or be made to agree on by the forces of rational argument... Ultimate values, our conceptions of what life and what society should be, are beyond the range of mere logic and compromise [of these ultimate values] could only maim and degrade them (Schumpeter 1975, p. 251).

(See also Richardson 1997 and Stokes 1998). On the other side is Habermas, who believes that under certain conditions, if we argue long enough we will come to consensus, indeed unanimity, along the way. Mill and Rousseau take the Habermasian position.

holding that if we let ideas, or the general will, and not self interest govern our decisions, we will reach agreement.

The tension at East parallels this debate in the literature. One side, represented largely by the administrators and others with formal decision making roles[10] believes that through enough meetings, both formal and informal, people will come to an agreement, even consensus, about what the best decisions are for the school. East has no clear policy about when a majority vote is necessary or when a consensus is necessary. My interviewees agree however that consensus is the most desirable goal; and at least two of the major decisions over the last few years have required a consensus before implementing them.

The lead decision makers recognize that part of their job is persuading and encouraging buy-in to ideas they would like to see promoted. The principal, Jim explains one of his approaches to persuasion, "A lot of what I do is one-legged meetings" (Jim 10/16/98, p.4). Jim's one-legged meetings are occasions where he catches someone in the hallway and begins to talk with them about what happened at another meeting or what they are thinking about the upcoming vote on a particular policy, all the while with one leg casually propped up behind him against the wall. His A.P.s joke about Jim's one-legged meetings, knowing the important role they play in the decision making process. "Being a leader takes more than ideas and knowledge. You can be the smartest person and have all the knowledge, but if you can't put it across then you're lost. And it's not just standing in front of a room. There are a lot of other pieces to it. Jim likes to call them one-legged conversations...Your basic lobbying" (Louie 9/30/98, p. 10).

Another set of key decision makers at the school are teachers in the science department. A disproportionate number of teachers in this department hold seats on formal decision making bodies. They have regular informal meetings during the school's official

[10] Recall that while the entire staff meets between one and four times monthly as a decision making body, there are numerous other decision making bodies that meet much more regularly and on which only a small percentage of the staff sit.

brunch period, where science teachers and a select handful of teachers from other departments gather. It is recognized as a time when information and ideas are simultaneously disseminated and gathered. "A lot of influence in the school depends on personal contact and also on tea drinking relationships" (Barbara 1/20/99, p.16). Resonant in Jim's one-legged meetings and Barbara's tea sessions is the idea that given the time and opportunity, people can be persuaded to agree on a common goal, if not upon a common good.

Teachers on the other side of the debate believe in helping students, they simply disagree on how best to accomplish this and they are skeptical, perhaps even cynical that there is a method for arriving at agreement that has integrity. Several teachers, though seemingly not the majority, express serious concern over the way decisions are made at East. Often they believe that they and others are being forced into agreement. "We vote until we get it right here. I once heard a leader say, 'We have to get them to think the right way.' As a social studies teacher that is a worrisome statement. 'Think the right way?' I'm going to think the way they want me to think?" (Sam, 1/13/99, p.4). Another teacher echoed Sam's fears, "The leaders here don't want sharing, they want agreement" (Debora, 1/15/99, p. 3b). It is unclear to me at this point in my research whether these teachers believe there ever could be agreement on a common goal and the paths toward it. It is clear at this point that there is a simple common good that everyone at East seems to agree on, school should help students be successful. The tension arises over two things (1) how to accomplish this goal and (2) a belief by some of the staff that discussions will get them there and a disbelief in the discussion process by others on the staff.

The other way in which the tension of self interest vs. the common good manifests itself at East is as a legitimation problem. Many teachers express anger at what they perceive as teachers in formal decision making roles acting out of self interest and not necessarily the interest of the school. "People like the steering committee and strand chairs [teachers who get a period off each day for their duties as decision makers] are beholden to

the administration. They have a stipend associated with their position, or release time [period off] or both...They have to dance to the music that they perceive the administration to be playing, just as new teachers without tenure might. Otherwise they could be replaced and probably would be" (Fred 12/2/98, p.12). "With [Annenberg] money some became more equal than others. They were going to conferences and meetings, one teacher missed 26 days last year for these! A lot of people have a lot of free time all over the US and some have accumulated frequent flier miles. These people who go to conventions bring nothing back to share with the rest of us who didn't go. No new information. No new techniques. Nothing" (Sam 1/13/99, 4).[11] These sentiments, whether accurate or not, indicate important tensions that democratic decision making (by allowing for multiple leaders) establishes. Teachers seen to be on the "inside" of the decision making process are not thought to be acting selflessly. The result of this perception is that the entire decision making process is delegitimized in the eyes of some of the teachers, leading to cynicism and apathy -- clearly sentiments not conducive to democratic decision making.

Experts as decision makers vs. an inclusive decision making process

Ask who should be included in democratic decision making in public schools and then ask who is the best person to make decisions in public schools and you will not get the same answers. While most participants would agree with the general democratic principle, "what touches all should be decided by all" (Walzer 1980, p.275. See also Rousseau 1992, Mill 1991), when it comes to deciding who will in fact sit at the decision making table there is much more hesitancy to include "all." Gordon Wood explains this as a result of mistrust, "The pluralism and egalitarianism of American society would prevent any elite, no matter how talented and enlightened, from speaking for the whole. Men from one class or interest could never be acquainted with the 'situation or wants' of those from another...

[11] I have not verified if in fact a teacher did take 26 days for meetings last year. I do know that one of the decision making bodies, the Core Team, is working on trying to institutionalize formal sharing of

Mistrust was a major impulse behind the development of American democracy" (Wood 1992, p. 100. See also Mill 1991). Wood implies that since people cannot trust those with other interests to understand their own position, they must be wary about who has power or voice at the decision making tables.

The tensions at East revolve around this very point. "Everyone needs to have ownership but we're starting to feel some resistance -- turf battles. 'WE are teachers. THEY are...'" (Elsa, 12/2/98, p.7). The "they" seems to be everyone. Teachers worry about:

- parents having voice, "If you were my physician and were making decisions about my medication, would you ask a panel of parents as to what is the best decision about my treatment?" (Henry 12/9/98, p.10);
- students having voice, "Students are short sighted" (Emily 12/16/98, p.7);
- administrators having voice, "We don't need administrators at the meetings...I don't think, if we are going to expect input, that an evaluator should be there owning a particular program or position. There is a danger that the wolf will eat the lamb if the lamb makes too much noise" (Fred 12/2/98, p.11);
- classified staff such as secretaries having voice, "I don't want classifieds telling me what to do" (Maddy 1/15/99, p.18);
- and even some other teachers having voice, "I'm abhorred that people think they have something to say when in my opinion they are really crummy teachers" (Debora 1/15/99, p.13).

In the same breath many will recognize it as fair and right to give everyone a voice and then proceed to deny certain groups a voice or to delimit their voice in some way. "Student voice is critical but it is hard to decide when it is appropriate" (Gwen 12/16/98,

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information by any teachers who attend conferences for which the school pays. I have not yet determined

p.6). "I'm all in favor of student voice totally, with one exception. I'd like to reserve one percent of the time for times when I want to say something to other adults without a student being present. There is a time when some communication deserves discretion and discrimination" (Louisa 11/6/98, p.4).

Students clearly pose the most difficult case since they are undoubtedly among the group "affected by the decisions," but age acts as a powerful barrier for many. Schumpeter writes, "Discrimination can never be entirely absent. For instance, in no country, however democratic, is the right to vote extended below a specified age" (Schumpeter 1975, p. 244). There are many teachers, administrators, parents and students who are sincerely interested in hearing from and empowering students and parents, but, as is clear from the quotes above, the democratic norms of inclusiveness conflict with many teachers' trust that other groups will make the best decisions possible.

Minority rights vs. majority rights

Theorists and practitioners alike recognize that minority opinions are inevitable in democratic decision making and that it is the role of democratic decision makers to ensure that minority voices are heard (See Sunstein 1991). Without the input of all of the participants, whether or not they share the majority opinion, a democratic decision making process again runs the risk of legitimation problems. That is, the very grounds upon which democratic decision making is founded require that all voices be included in the decision making process; when certain voices are marginalized or entirely excluded, one of the central *raisons d'être* of democratic decision making dissipates.

Democratic decision making processes are especially vulnerable to marginalizing a certain minority, the "non-participants." Anderson explains, "Any system that calls for more than minimal participation will favor the active over the apathetic, the rich over the poor...participatory forms of decision making are inegalitarian" (Anderson 1998, p.580

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the efficacy of this policy.

See also Mansbridge 1980, p.viii). The inegalitarian nature of participatory democracy is found at East in the ways in which teachers who are fearful of speaking in public do not voice their opinions. "Many people on campus have wonderful things to say but they're shy, reserved and they are not going to get up and speak in front of a group of 100. A lot feel like the vocal ones are making the decisions" (May 11/6/98, p.5). "Many of my colleagues are not as articulate and passionate about some things as I seem to be and they sit me down and say, 'I totally agree with you but I'm not about to stand up and speak against the proposals though" (Debora 1/15/99, p.3). Voting of course ultimately includes even the "shy" voices, but voting can be for choices that would have looked very different on the ballot had the "minority" voices been heard.

Process vs. outcome

Earlier I argued that democratic decision-making should be evaluated as an end itself. I also described how many theorists and practitioners argue that democratic decision making is a good in itself -- that because it is the most just way of making decisions it is inherently good. I wish to emphasize that because I see it as an end in itself, I do not necessarily see it as a good in itself. Many theorists raise the question of whether a decision making process that results in bad decisions can be inherently good. "Some democratic collective choices are too execrable to be legitimate, however attractive the procedures that generate them"(Cohen 1996, p.97). Cohen ultimately finds in favor of the process. Schumpeter, however, finds in favor of outcomes. "Would we approve of a democratic constitution itself that produced such results [persecution of Christians or Jews for example] in preference to a non-democratic one that would avoid them?" (Schumpeter 1975, p242.) He answers no.

At its heart, this debate is over which is more important, means or ends. In the last 21 interviews (12 teachers, 8 students and 2 parents) I conducted at East I asked the

following question in an attempt to determine whether practitioners believed the process/means was more important or the outcome/ends was more important.

I'm going to give you two scenarios and I want you to choose between the two and then tell me why that is your preference. Scenario A: Your school is run by an administrator who makes all of the decisions him/herself. Every decision this administrator makes is a decision I guarantee you will be a decision that you *know* is the best decision for teaching and learning. Scenario B: Your school is run by a shared decision making process where administrators and teachers and perhaps students and parents have some say in the decision making. It is clear that with all these decision makers there can be no guarantee that the decisions the group makes will necessarily be the best decisions for teaching and learning.

Seventeen of the 21 chose scenario B. Their reasons parallel the reasons that other teachers gave for why they chose to maintain democratic decision making processes:[1]

- Implementation is facilitated: "The commitment to the decisions will be greater" (Tad 2/26/99).
- More decision makers is better: "Everyone has something to offer" (Ramona 3/3/99).
- Resilience is improved: "We wouldn't have to start over again with a new principal" (Betty 3/3/99).
- Justice is served: "The school belongs to everyone" (Trinh 2/24/99).

The four who chose Scenario A were all teachers. Two believed in the value of experts as leaders. "I'd always go with experience and confidence of an expert leader" (Michelle 2/5/99). One was excited by the prospect of a principal finally doing the right thing and returning to tracked classes (Frank 2/24/99). Another explained that Scenario A sees the role of decision maker as a burden. "It would take the onus off teachers" (Harry 2/5/99).

These findings may be indicative of the fact that there is only minimal tension around the process vs. outcome issue and a significant amount of faith in the democratic decision making processes established at East.

[1] I have no page numbers for these quotes because the tapes have not yet been transcribed. I am quoting from the notes I took during the interviews.

How are the tensions attended and/or resolved, if at all?

Researchers who consider what sorts of tensions arise in public schools with democratic decision making structures may find different tensions than the ones I found at East. No matter what tensions they find, however, democratic theorists have probably thought and written on them and perhaps even developed some solutions for resolving them. Given the link between the theory and practice of democratic decision making as I have illustrated here, it may be valuable to look to the theory for ideas to resolve the tensions that arise in practice. Since the problems are by nature problems of democratic decision making, perhaps there are solutions in the democratic decision making literature – solutions that schools involved in democratic decision making may find useful. Thus, I propose that researchers should also ask, "How are the tensions attended to and/or resolved, if at all?" In answering this question researchers should turn to both the theory and to practice. For this paper I highlight examples of possible solutions in the theory. I do not consider answers from my research at East since I have not analyzed enough data to be clear on the answer.

Solutions to tensions around minority voice, efficiency, inclusiveness and common interest may be largely issues of appropriate response. For example, there will necessarily be appropriate times to call deliberation to a close and go to a vote. Habermas "characterizes democratic deliberation as a search for the truth and majority voting as a process whereby this search is put on hold for e the sake of coming up with a decision" (Richardson 1997, p.356). Knowing when to make the decision and end deliberation could alleviate some of the tension around the inefficiency of democratic decision making. In many of the meetings I have observed at East there are one or two people who regularly play the role of calling motions to a vote and/or of forming motions to focus the

deliberation. Perhaps if this role was formalized it would improve the efficiency of the process.

It will be necessary, in calling items to a vote, to consider the extent to which opinions on all sides of the issue being deliberated have been heard. This would address in theory the issue of minority voice. In practice however, as I saw at East, people who are uncomfortable with public speaking are still left out. Mansbridge suggests three ways to respond to this problem. One is to decentralize decision making to smaller groups alleviating the fear of speaking in front of an enormous room full of people. Another is to have voting by consensus. "Consensus protects the minority from being 'trashed' by allowing it to command sufficient attention from the majority to make its position understood" (Mansbridge 1980, p.253). A third is to hold periodic referenda in order to revisit decisions made in the past. When to move to smaller groups or vote by consensus or hold referenda are issues of appropriate response. Rousseau makes the case that "the more important and weighty the resolutions, the nearer should the opinion which prevails approach unanimity" (Rousseau 1992, p.12), providing some possible guidelines for when it is appropriate to vote by consensus.

These are only early thoughts from my reading of democratic theory for solutions for democratic decision making tensions. My intention is only to illustrate that the theory does suggest some guidelines that may be useful to schools working with democratic decision making processes.[7]

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have suggested that researchers ought to ask different questions when assessing democratic decision making in public schools, possibly beginning with the three I ask here: (1) What is the appeal of democratic decision making processes — why

[7] There are in fact some theorists who describe quite specific criteria as solutions to pathologies they argue are inherent to democratic decision making (See Stokes 1998 and Schumpeter 1975). The criteria are broad however and would need to be explored to be useful to schools. I therefore did not include them here.

adopt or maintain them?' (2) What sorts of tensions arise from the processes – what is difficult about democratic decision making? (3) How are the tensions attended to and/or resolved, if at all?' I have also suggested that researchers and practitioners may find democratic theory useful in resolving tensions that arise once democratic decision making models are in place. There is a need for, and indeed I intend to work toward, an assessment tool to evaluate democratic decision making in practice. Perhaps a theory of the stages of democratic decision making would be useful, or a rubric or ranking scale that allows researchers to measure some of the various components (i.e. the structures, the processes, the norms) on an on-going basis. If we are going to understand and accurately study democratic decision making reforms in public schools we are going to need some new tools.

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